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The Intelligence Semi-Shuffle

A handy guide to reform of the intelligence community awaited Adm. Stansfield Turner when he was appointed Director of Central Intelligence six months ago. But Turner overreached himself, making enemies in high places and low. Now the President has ordered a semi-reorganization that increases Turner's power but not by as much as he wanted and probably needed for full control.

The guide to reform was the report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence under Frank Church, which made an exhaustive study last year. The committee found that various intelligence agencies were unresponsive to presidential needs and direction in several ways.

First the product as a whole gave short shrift to economic information and was served up in a volume and detail difficult for the busy men at the top of government to absorb. Secondly, there was bitter, and often unresolved, infighting among the Central Intelligence Agency and two other units under Pentagon control—the Defense Intelligence Agency, linking the military services, and the National Security Agency, specializing in electronic interception. Finally, the CIA itself, particularly in covert operations, interpreted presidential mandates in a highly self-serving way with results often out of line with the original intent.

As a remedy the committee suggested that the Director of Central Intelligence run the CIA and also make the rest of the community more responsive to the President by control over budget and the assignment of tasks and missions. Turner seemed almost ideal for that job. Since he had been Carter's Annapolis classmate, he had a personal relationship with the President. His military career put him in good with the Pentagon.

As it happened, however, Turner had limited contacts with the civilian world and big ideas for himself. He submitted to Carter a plan for reform that made him an intelligence czar with operational control over all the intelligence agencies. That inevitably put him at odds with the Defense Department and Secretary Harold Brown.

He further antagonized Brown, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and the White House to boot, by the position he took on the AWACS, an advanced air-attack warning system, which this country proposed to sell to Iran. In a letter to the General Accounting Office, Turner opposed sale to Iran on the ground that the warning system, including its ciphering material, might fall into the hands of the Russians, thus compromising important American secrets. In fact, the model being sold to Iran was not equipped with the sensitive cipher, and most experts doubt the Russians have the electronic know-how to put it to use anyway.

Finally, at the CIA, Turner put a layer of naval personnel between himself and the intelligence officials. He moved to replace, as deputy director, a popular career man with Lyman Kirkpatrick, a former inspector general and executive director of the CIA who left to work at Brown University after being crippled by polio in 1965.

These career officials in the agency, feeling themselves cut off and demoted, immediately began to retaliate by leaking around the director. They spilled the beans on the AWACS goof. At least partly to discredit Kirkpatrick and what he had tolerated as inspector general, they served up a whole new set of horror stories about CIA experiments with human guinea pigs.

In these conditions, Carter accepted the Turner reorganization proposal only in part. The President did give the director budgetary control over the whole intelligence community and some authority to mete out tasks. But he kept operational control over the two Pentagon agencies in the hands of the Secretary of Defense, and he set up as arbiter of priorities a Cabinet committee including the Secretaries of Defense and State.

Perhaps there is enough power in the office of director to manage the whole community. Turner apparently retains the confidence of the President. But he has not established himself with his colleagues. The DIA and NSA are not going to embrace his leadership, and neither will the CIA easily accept his authority.

So it remains a question whether he can truly run the intelligence community. Or if anybody else can, for that matter. The progressive demoralization of the CIA by investigation and leak, the tendency of every foreign-policy-agency to develop its own intelligence, and the bitter infighting among rival agencies seem certain to go on as before. It may be that the country will have to live for a long time without a well-coordinated intelligence operation. Indeed, the argument now being made in behalf of the latest reorganization is that it maintains competition among the agencies.

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